TEACHING ENGLISH: SOME REMARKS ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE SYMPATHETIC TEACHER IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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A story is often the best medium of establishing a bond of
sympathy between children and teacher.

Paul Klapper, 1914, p. 94.

Michael Apelt[1] was outlining the day's lesson for his Year 8 class. The twenty seven girls and boys had been studying a unit of work on literature relating to environmental issues. Michael stood at the front of the room, leaning casually against the edge of his desk which was positioned diagonal to the bank of windows lining the wall opposite the entry door. The students' desks were arranged in clusters or groups of four which were placed in such a way as to maximise the chance of most students being able to look forward, toward the whiteboard, when necessary. The walls were bare. Michael explained that teachers could not have their own teaching rooms in this overcrowded school in a large city in Australia. Instead the rooms that at one time had been designated as English classrooms were now used for mathematics and geography classes. Besides, security was a problem, and anything in the rooms, such as books or posters could be stolen. Still, as Michael explained, the lack of material inside the room was more than compensated for by the natural beauty of the area, and the changing landscape outside the school room windows. At this time of year he and his students looked out across a large playing field and park to a line of flowering jacaranda trees, the blue haze of the flowering canopy almost exactly matching the cloudless arc of the sky.

This particular morning Michael began the lesson by directing the children's attention to the view of the landscape beyond the classroom windows. He had indicted during an earlier conversation that he was preparing students to read *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo* a novel by the Western Australian writer, Tim

[1] Michael Apelt is a pseudonym selected by one of the teachers involved in a small project conducted in 2005. At the time of the study he was twenty-eight years of age and had been teaching in a full-time capacity for five years. His teaching appointments were initially with the Catholic school system (3 years) and then with the state school system (2 years). Michael is now undertaking doctoral studies in the United States.

Winton whose work encompasses youth literature, novels for adults, short stories and plays. Much of Winton's work prompts his readers to contemplate the landscape and the environment and is premised on the idea that the environment is fragile and precious and our activities in relation to the environment have implications for ourselves and future generations. Michael began this lesson by asking the students to describe what they could see by looking out the windows of the classroom. They began by summarising the view, the trees, the houses, the park across the road. Finally they began to describe the quality of the light, its intensity, its 'blueness'. The sky, they noted, was 'cloudless'. Well, as one student pointed out it was not exactly 'cloudless', that did not quite capture what she wanted. It was 'totally without a mark, from horizon to horizon'; it was 'empty of everything'; it had 'nothing to identify it as sky', except for its remarkable 'expanse', and 'colour' also described as an 'intense, searing blue'. And apparently high in the sky already, although it was only early in the school day, was the sun. Described by the children as 'beating relentlessly down', as being 'so bright that it could never be seen'; and producing the 'searing, dry heat' that was 'engulfing' the classroom, and as 'dangerous' because of 'sunburn, skin cancer and eye cataracts'. The sun became a jumping off point for a discussion about the 'hole in the ozone layer', 'climate change' and possible causes and remedies. Although Michael had no science training he allowed the children to roam across this topic, offering opinions, speculating about solutions. At times the information the students' drew on was faulty in scientific terms, or their line of argument seemed contradictory, but Michael allowed this to proceed. As he pointed out later, his own knowledge of the area was sketchy, but he was not interested in the content of the discussion. What he wanted his students to do was to 'feel' the landscape and to 'express' it, to capture its 'essence' as best they could and then to use that knowledge of themselves and their relationship to their environment to explore other important social issues.

It was the process of exploring and discussing and the experience of trying out their 'voices', of practicing communication and of revealing their own idiosyncrasies that was the important learning point for Michael. At times when the debate about climate change became more intense Michael intervened. But the interventions were not about the **content** of the discussion, rather they were about the **conduct** of the discussion. For instance, one boy was clearly annoyed by the suggestion that the hole in the ozone layer could be easily fixed by the elimination of pollutants. He pointed out that power generation always requires the production of something that is not very good for the planet and that coal generated power had more detrimental effects than other options such as nuclear power but at that point he was shouted down by a group of boys. This was one of the points at which Michael intervened. He was annoyed that the boys had begun to taunt one another. He indicated that this was not acceptable behaviour. As he outlined his objections he also drew attention to aspects of his own character by saying things such as: 'I know I get annoyed with people when they disagree with me. Especially when I know I'm right. [laughter] But we all ... umm ... we all have to be tolerant of each other's views. And I know that I can learn things by listening to

other people.' The students listened. Michael was at ease in this classroom. Relaxed, in control and obviously popular with his students, he maintained a casual yet commanding presence that was deceptively 'natural'.

Later when I commented on how well Michael got along with his students he said he made a point of knowing them by taking a genuine interest in their lives and their well being. He remarked that he never held himself aloof from students and that he often took time to talk with his students outside the classroom usually on his many periods of 'play ground' duty. He remarked, also, that he could not remember a time in his years of teaching when he had met a child he disliked. In Michael's view, every child had a positive aspect to his or her character, irrespective of how challenging or confronting the behaviour appeared to be and it was his job as a teacher to 'uncover' the 'good and interesting' aspects of the child's character and to help the child to build self knowledge.

The choice of a Western Australian text also was important in terms of pedagogy and approach to literature. Michael's premise was that Winton captures his settings in uniquely literary ways and he therefore spent time selecting particular scenes that would help his students make connections between their lives, their environment and the setting for the novel while also learning to appreciate the skill of a writer who could capture what Michael described as "the essence" of a Western Australian beach, sky, land, ocean, air, light. Michael concentrated on developing his students' imaginations and encouraging creativity in how they talked about the environment. In the opening scene of his introductory lesson to *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo* (1990) he invited his students to "feel the air", to close their eyes and imagine the hazy blue of the jacaranda blossoms, to imagine the way the colour "hung in the air, blending with the sky" and so on. He skilfully connected their imaginings with the words on the page, not by opening the book but by reciting from memory a selection from *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo*. From there Michael prompted students to link to climate change debates. The arc of the lesson drew down toward the closing scene when Michael produced a print of Brett Whiteley's 1977 painting, *The Jacaranda Tree.* He invited students to contemplate the painting in light of their own view of the line of jacarandas across the park. He talked about why a tree that is not native to Australia could have captured the imaginations of so many people, not least of all the town planners who had planted the streets and parks of the school's suburb several decades earlier. This was followed by a brief but spirited speculation by the students about the attraction of 'foreign' trees for the 'foreigners' who inhabited the country after 1788. This class of not particularly high achieving or well behaved Year 8 students contributed to a lively conversation, remained focussed on the topics and engaged in developing ideas throughout. They did not write or read during this lesson but as Michael commented, the scene was now set for Tim Winton to enter. Michael's pedagogy centred on establishing "connectedness" for his young readers. He focussed in the first instance on establishing connections between students' current environment and their experiences which were essentially Western Australian.

Although 5 of the 28 students in this class had been born outside the state, and outside Australia, all had lived in Western Australia for four or more years.

Australian texts are a popular choice for study in secondary school English classrooms and in university courses (see the Australian Literature Gateway or the Australian Literature Resource commonly referred to as the AustLit data base[2] at http://www.austlit.edu.au/ for a comprehensive summary of university courses listing Australian authors for study, including Tim Winton whose work is included in courses on Australian Literature and courses on Children's Literature). The expansion of the study of Australian literature that commenced in earnest in Australian universities and schools in the 1970s has followed a number of paths from concern with building a national identity to concern with critiquing or problematising aspects of Australian society, values and beliefs. All elements were visible in Michael's classroom and were an important part of his pedagogy. The choice of a Western Australian author was important for his approach to English teaching which he believed was first and foremost a means for expanding his students' imagination and creativity and connecting them to the environment, values and traditions of their state and more broadly, to Australia, although the tensions for Western Australians in their relationship to the nation also were a topic of conversation in his classes. Michael joked that his students had been on holiday to Bali but 'over east' (the term used to indicate every other state and territory of Australia) was another country, rarely if ever visited, and often an object of scorn or resentment. His own focus on the work of Tim Winton opened a number of possibilities for exploring sensibilities, both personal and social. Michael valued the ability to articulate ideas, make connections, expresses personal views while promoting the values of tolerance and a 'fair go' that he believed should be preserved as part of the Australian character and are very much in evidence in Winton's work, however, he also placed a great deal of emphasis on helping students to question and critique values in relation to gender, race, social class and religion. In Michael's view, *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo* provided an accessible gateway to all of these issues and his pedagogy was a clever blend of heritage approaches to English (a focus on enduring literature – Winton is a multi award winning, internationally acknowledged author), growth approaches to English (a focus on the personal, imaginative and creative development of individual students) and cultural studies approaches to English (a focus on questioning and exploring issues of culture, including gender, race, social class and nationalism). He laughingly described himself as a "non-sectarian" teacher of English, consciously choosing and applying different models of English without regard for differences in theoretical position but he did blend these approaches to produce a local focus since connecting with students by engaging them in literary explorations of their environment was an important and effective aspect of Michael's pedagogy.

[2] The development of the AustLit database has been supported over a number of years by the Australian Research Council's, Linkage, Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LIEF) Grants in collaboration with a number of Australian universities.

In this, his introductory lesson to *Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo,* Michael demonstrated a highly skilled interweaving of three key elements of his lesson: first, an imaginative exploration of the immediate setting the students inhabited, second, establishing connections to the broader social issue (in this case, climate change), third, a focus on literary techniques and the novel being studied. These elements are commonly found in an English lesson but a layperson could ask: Why take such a roundabout route to the point of the lesson? Given that this is an English lesson, and the modern content of English is language and literature, why then would a teacher spend time on what appear to be peripheral issues such as the students' environment (looking out the window, 'feeling' and describing the atmosphere, contemplating the view and so on) and wider social issues such as climate change which in the context of a classroom discussion (as opposed to bus-stop conversation) should be restricted to the science, geography, or at best, the social studies classroom? Why not start with the novel? Michael's clarity about his goals and his deep understanding of his students and the types of things they are receptive to (talking not writing, listening not reading) helped him to shape his pedagogy. Encouraging students to engage with the novel, its language and ideas, is a core goal. He will go on to read most of the novel to his students, secure in the knowledge that they will not read it on their own. His detailed discussion of language use, plot, setting, theme and characterisation are so skilfully handled that the students do not complain when the reading is interrupted to focus on particular literary tropes. Issues of sexism and racism, social class and rural Australia are explored through activities and discussion. The two or three students in this class who read the book outside class are set advanced work, researching the Lockie Leonard novels and the industry that developed from them though television and film. At the end of the sequence of Winton lessons they will present this research to their classmates. Michael's wish was that every child in this class would voluntarily read another Tim Winton novel over the summer break. His students were reluctant to leave on the final day of term, dawdling in the classroom and out on the veranda, engaging Michael in conversation about what he would do over the Christmas break. Michael is a talented and engaging teacher, but this type of relationship is not uncommonly formed between students and their English teacher. And yet it can appear 'mysterious' to other professional educators and articulating the elements of English pedagogy has proved to be difficult. Nevertheless, we have made some headway in the two decades since Medway (1980) commented that:

> English teachers do not describe what happens in their lessons as "learning" or what their pupils end up with as "knowledge"; or if they do it is only when referring to subsidiary aspects of the work such as spelling or literary facts, and not to what they regard as the *central* activities. "Knowledge" and "learning" are tied in people's minds to fact and information, and the reason English teachers avoid the terms is that they do not see themselves as dealing with facts. Indeed it is sometimes said the English is "a subject without a content" (p.13).

Despite the fact that Medway did not elaborate on the "central" activities of English indicated above by his own italicising of the word, we in Australia have responded in recent years to systems level pressure through national testing and national or Australian curriculum by becoming better at defining what we do. But our definitions are at the level of curriculum processes and to a lesser extent at the level of content. Pedagogy as it plays out in the secondary English classroom remains a taken-for-granted aspect of the work of English teachers and is treated as a natural process, rather than a construct of history and culture. English pedagogy has almost no history in Australia. A handful of historical publications, including Paul Brock's work on English syllabus history in New South Wales (1982) and Green and Beavis' 1995 collection, *Teaching the English subjects: Essays on Curriculum History and Australian Schooling* have provided useful guides to two aspects of English: curriculum and syllabus development. Wayne Sawyer drew attention to the historical gap in his 2003 editorial for *English in Australia*, issue 136, which included a number of reflections on English curricula history both nationally and internationally. Currently, Phil Cormack, Bill Green and I are working on a history of the teaching of reading in Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council[3]. The focus is on teaching beginning reading rather than reading in the secondary level, however, even at the primary level very little history exits (Freebody, 2007; Green & Cormack, 2008).

In many respects Michael's pedagogy is familiar territory for English teachers. We recognise the approach to developing students' sensibilities from reading any number of books on English teaching, published over the past three decades, books by John Dixon (1967), Robert Scholes (1985), Peter Medway (1980) and Goodson and Medway (1990). My reading and my own experience as a teacher of high school English made the strategies and techniques displayed in Michael's classroom appear to be so taken for granted as to count as normal. The idea that what I was observing constituted a special type of pedagogy, one that is highly structured, carefully designed and deliberately inculcated would seem a foreign if not a confronting suggestion. Surely, what Michael's pedagogy reflects is what every good teacher would do? Well, no. It reflects what most effective teachers of English would do but it is not 'natural', it is structured and constructed, it is learned and it has a specific history. This chapter is prompted by an interest in this history and in exploring what I consider to be our avoidance (as an English teaching community and as English curriculum scholars and theorists) of questions relating to the past and to the future of the subject. At a time when the Australian curriculum is being developed for a family of four English courses and when the subject itself is under question, we cannot afford to ignore our own histories of pedagogy and curricula.

English designates a particular pedagogical arrangement as well as a particular arrangement of curricula. It is not so much a question of asking 'what does the English teacher teach?' but of asking 'how

[3] Australian Research Council, Discovery, DP0987648. Teaching reading in Australia: A historical investigation of early reading pedagogy, the figure of the teacher and literacy education. Chief Investigators, Phil Cormack, Bill Green, Annette Patterson.

does the English teacher teach?' In each of his lessons, Michael focussed on the 'how' rather than the 'what'. Although he chose his material with care, selecting Winton as the central author because of his knowledge of the work as a Western Australian, his view of Winton's work as having enduring qualities and his belief that any book from the Lockie Leonard series would appeal to his Year 8 class, particularly the boys, he also was interested in the way that Winton treats the environment. The links that Michael made between Winton's prose and the environment inhabited by his students allowed them to engage with image, simile and metaphor and to explore the techniques of descriptive prose in relation to environment. There is a specific and intentional focus here on the Australian landscape, Australian characters and Australian themes of mateship, loyalty, freedom and connectedness with the landscape. Michael was deliberately working toward developing in his students a reflective practice in relation to national and local identity. He encouraged his students to think about the type of future they wanted for their country and here he drew broadly on Australian writing including historical texts and Aboriginal writers.

The careful identity work in relation to place and self that Michael conducted in his classroom, building connections with and for his students, often goes unmentioned by theorists and historians of English. The story of English curriculum history presented over the past two decades by curriculum theorists working from a broadly critical position goes something like this: a subject called English came about in the elementary or primary school through the amalgamation of a number of different activities such as the teaching of reading, writing, literature, spelling and speaking. When these separate activities were finally arranged under the heading, English, teachers continued to focus on imparting the rules of grammar, the skills of decoding text, the construction of a well formed hand and the production of proper speech. However, many teachers became increasingly unhappy with what they viewed as the rigidity of this approach and sought instead to focus on helping the student to better understand him or herself in relation to the world around them (Dixon, 1967). The means to this understanding would be through the study of literature, which took an increasingly prominent position within the English curriculum in the secondary school systems (Brock, 1982). By the 1960s, the self-exploratory exposition of the child had become an explicit project (Medway,) and English classrooms became spaces where children could learn about social problems and become reflective individuals (Dixon, 1967). This focus on 'the personal', however, soon gave way to an interest in the 'political' and by the 1970s the rhetoric surrounding English teaching was aligned with questions of ideology (Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990). English became the subject areas where students were expected not only to understand patterns of social inequality and the processes of ideological manipulation but also to do something about them (Eagleton, 1996).

Generally this view of the development of English has remained untroubled by English theorists and curriculum historians. In 1988, however, the appearance of Ian Hunter's *Culture and Government* began to

unsettle traditional accounts by directing attention to the role of the state in the formation of citizens through particular pedagogical arrangements. The book gained little attention at the time in Australia or elsewhere among English curriculum theorists. In my own case, I was in the final stages of producing a doctoral thesis in the field of English education premised on many of the assumptions about English that Hunter was challenging. Several years later, Hunter produced a more readable version of the arguments he outlined through *Culture and Government.* In *Rethinking the School* Hunter (1993) provided further theoretical grounds for doubting the critical education establishment's attachment to ideology critique and its accompanying assumption that English has a recuperating mission. Still, as the reception of the work of Foucault attests, it takes more than compelling arguments backed by archival research to shift the perceptions of a research community. Hunter's work has met with indifference or resistance in education circles in Australia. A source of resistance has perhaps been an apparent misreading of Hunter's work as promoting a politically conservative agenda (Threadgold, 1997). This may be due in part to the role accorded to the state in the formation of disciplinary practices in Hunters' account and to its unfashionably, un-postmodernist theoretical position. Whatever the reasons the work has done little to shift the field of English education research away from its traditional preoccupation with critiquing the ideological intentions of the discipline, problematising its curriculum content and questioning the feminist or Marxist credentials of its personnel.

The argument put by Hunter is simple enough, although also unique in the field. He demonstrated through discussion and analyses of British parliamentary papers and other primary sources that the aim of state education was to produce a special form of the whole person, that is, one who complies through self-regulatory practices with the laws of society and is at the same time creative and skilful. This was to be achieved through a particular type of pedagogy, one that focused on developing techniques for introspection, self-examination and self-adjustment in accordance with norms of behaviour derived from a mix of Protestant Christian ethics, democratic ideals and emerging capitalist philosophy while at the same time acquiring useful skills in whatever capacities were designated as important for the times (linguistic, mathematical, or scientific knowledge and applications; nature studies; cookery; sewing and so on). Although the pedagogy that was to carry this formidable array of personal comportments was generalised within the infant schools of Scotland established by Stow and Wilderspin (Patterson, 2002; Cormack, in press) eventually it migrated into specific subject areas such as history, geography, civics, and literature. Hunter's historical work demonstrated that by the second decade of the twentieth century, the subjects arranged under the heading, English had become the principal recipient of the by then highly refined version of a pedagogy that originated in the infant schools of Scotland and English teachers had begun to develop the strategies and techniques of an expert corps of pastoral technicians.

During the 1980s, Eagleton politicised our view of English teaching by suggesting that literature and English constitute a 'moral technology' in the service of middle-class ideology. Dixon challenged Eagleton's account in his history of the subject by pointing out what he identified as the 'grass roots' origins of English in the working men's groups of England. And yet despite a difference in opinion about the intentions and origins of English, both Eagleton's and Dixon's accounts are remarkably similar in their focus on English as the carrier or transmitter of political interests.

Some histories of English could unsettle this view, however, by pointing out the contingency of English teaching practices. Baldwin (1944), for instance suggests that Shakespeare learnt to write by means of directive teaching (or what we might now call 'transmission' teaching) that focussed on training students to reproduce 'set pieces' and formulaic styles. Similarly, Ong (1958) explores the contours of an English terrain that from the perspective of the late twentieth century looks unrecognisable. He suggests, for instance, that many of the earlier writers so admired by twentieth century critics learnt to 'express themselves' by imitating rhetorical schemata. Their teachers taught in direct and directive ways. The focus was on the accumulation of specific linguistic skills organised in terms of a limited set of procedures for learning to imitate classical writers. Ian Michael's (1987) scholarly exploration of English teaching from the sixteenth century suggests that directive methods were 'the norm' across several centuries with teachers expecting children to learn to read by rote and to write by imitation. Prior to the nineteenth century the idea that teachers would expect students to search their experiences and their own consciousness in order to become a more sensitive person would appear strange. Furthermore, as Hunter pointed out, the techniques for teaching large groups of children how to do this had yet to be invented.

What much of this history suggests is that the emergence of English as a space in which the child could more or less discover him or herself is not a sign of its goal to either repress (Eagleton) or liberate (Dixon) the individual but instead constitutes its actual mode of historical existence. Hunter (1991) claims that English is neither knowledge nor ideology, but "the name of an instituted means of forming a particular type of person" (p.73). English exists as a series of historically contingent techniques and practices for shaping the self-managing capacities of children. What Michael and I viewed as the highly desirable features of English teaching emerged from an array of innovations in popular schooling developed by selected pioneers of the child-centred, whole-class mode of teaching that became increasingly popular in state funded schools in England and its English speaking former colonies during the nineteenth century. Hunter has outlined the emergence of this form of teaching from its invention by Wilderspin and Stow in the infant schools of Scotland in the early quarter of the nineteenth century and it is worth pausing for a moment to contemplate the contours of this remarkable invention which produced the classrooms we have today.

The formation of particular capacities in students such as the capacity for self-problematisation, self-regulation and sensitivity, speculative critique and so on that were so well rehearsed in Michael's classroom and in many English classrooms around the country, form part of the 'comportment' or 'conduct' of the good English student and by extrapolation, the good citizen, one who is capable of regulating him or herself, respond sensitively to others, view the environment as a limited resource, appreciate the beauty of nature, critique an argument and so on. This work on the self takes on new meaning in the context of identity formation. The role of Australian literature and its use in the English classroom is clear and Michael's selection of Australian texts (poetry, drama, film, novel, art work) was a calculated pedagogical move aimed at developing specific skills and techniques of reflection, analysis and critique in the context of a (Western) Australian environment.

Work of English teachers is complex, demanding as it does the use of naturalness and constructedness (a constructed naturalness) which is no less sincere for all that. It is at its best a sincere performance of sympathy and empathy, a constructed capacity to link to students' lives through a combination of personality and narrative deployed in the interests of moral training. English pedagogy is not locked in a battle (as some theorists would have us believe) involving freedom (of the individual's inner being) versus surveillance (of the individual's moral formation), Bronwyn Mellor and I tried some time ago (Mellor and Patterson, 1994) to address the misapprehension of some theorists and historians that moral training is a 'bad thing' and Brian Moon (2001, 2007) has made invaluable contributions to this argument over the years. As Hunter (1996) has commented, "These problems are symptoms of the genuine difficulty that we have in understanding the reciprocity of freedom and discipline in the English lesson." Using texts as a means of making visible and (re)shaping the conduct of our students has a long history in education and is a worthwhile and I would argue essential technique for inculcating moral norms and developing the capacities of the self-regulating citizen who is at the heart of the modern state. This talk of moral surveillance and adjustment and of services in the interests of the state does not sit well with a profession that has somehow convinced itself of its emancipatory powers, nevertheless, Michael's pedagogy has a strong lineage and he deployed his pedagogical skills in the interest of inserting himself into the lives of his students as a means of managing their behaviour, shaping their personalities and developing their capacity for self-reflection and self-regulation. The study of Australian literature is one technique among many at our disposal in shaping the lives of future citizens. It serves a special purpose through its imaginary and creative potential for providing the "bond of sympathy"

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